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Moving teams from campaign to transition: Five things to get right

How the shift from campaigning to transitioning is managed can set the foundation for an administration.

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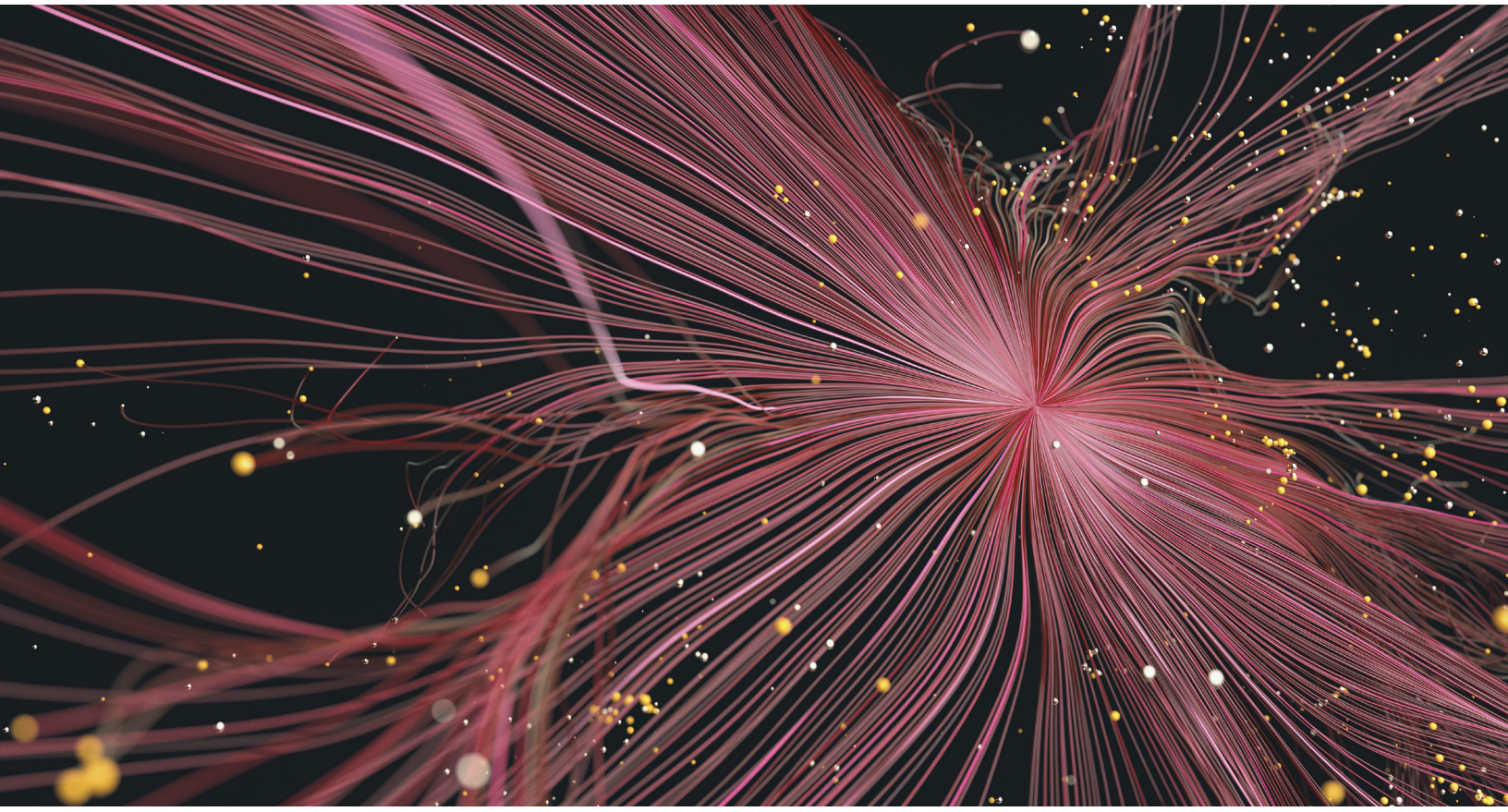

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The brief period between election and inauguration is a high-stakes sprint to prepare to govern. The effectiveness of this period hinges on shifting rapidly from campaigning to planning the transition—two efforts with very different objectives and skill sets. A campaign is laser focused on victory and rewards the skills and culture that maximize that focus. Following the election, a significantly expanded team must pivot hard to setting up the infrastructure required to govern and bring together multiple pre-election efforts—a process-heavy endeavor that can feel quite different from a campaign.

There are five crucial elements to get right in integrating the expanded post-election transition team.

Get the right people into the right roles

Planning early to bring together the right people and skills is the foundation of a successfully integrated post-election team. Think about staffing early. Make some initial decisions well in advance of the election about who to appoint and when they should start. This ensures priority positions are filled the day after the election, staffing is conducted with the transition to governing in mind, and people are not brought on to the team and then left waiting to be assigned tasks.

It can be useful to create "parking places." The post-election transition team is unlikely to accommodate all personnel who have worked on the campaign. The sheer number of job seekers can disrupt a smooth post-election shift. When positioning staff, consider the full post-election ecosystem. It may make sense to provide some staff with paid time off for their months of hard work rather than creating unnecessary roles.

Decide who gets to decide

Clarity on who makes what decisions is historically a major post-election pain point, as new leaders with new skills come on board and objectives shift. Aligning up front on major decision paths prevents duplication, enables staff to get questions resolved rapidly, and ensures the right people are involved along the way.

Without clear guidance, these four failure modes are typical:

— Ad hoc backchanneling due to unclear chains of command

— Top leaders bottlenecking due to insufficient delegation

— Decision paralysis due to too many voices

— Poor or inconsistent decision making due to too few voices

The following four best practices can help mitigate these failure modes:

— *Develop clear decision processes immediately for the most critical, challenging areas.* Identify the most important decision paths and formalize them. Stopping to articulate, codify, and distribute formal decision processes for the most thorny common decisions will likely pay off for even the most time-strapped team.

— *Develop clear decision rights for each key role.* Post-election team leaders should have a strong understanding of which decisions are theirs to make and—just as importantly—not theirs to make.

— *Communicate decision processes and decision rights.* Decision-making processes are only useful to the extent that everyone knows what they are. They should be disseminated from the top and frequently reinforced through various channels.

— *Enforce decision processes and decision rights.* When agreed-upon decision processes are not followed up front, individuals quickly fall back on informal and ad hoc channels. It is important that leaders immediately and directly address violations, even if well-meaning or inadvertent, to maintain discipline and set an example.

Set the tone for the team

The culture of the administration will be sown in the transition period. Those coming together to prepare to govern post-election likely bring very different cultures, norms, and expectations with them.

Prioritizing an intentional culture up front can also help prevent many organizational issues, including competing power centers based on pre-election roles. Leaders should rapidly and consistently establish values and working norms. Communicate a set of simple, easily understood core values that reflect the candidate and signal the values by which the administration will govern (for example, "one team" or "assume positive intent"). Set and clearly communicate leadership norms—the behavior expected from the top team (such as keeping disagreements in the room or using official processes, not backchannels)—to reinforce these values and prevent problems before they start.

Invest in starting off right

Given the short period this team has to execute, aligning the top team on a clear internal path forward within 72 hours of Election Day is vital to getting the broader team moving collectively in support of the highest priorities. Too often, teams in high-pressure situations are so focused on jumping into execution that they forget to make sure everyone is driving toward the same goals. Sitting down together early ensures everyone is focused on a common set of high-priority tasks and timelines, outlines individual responsibilities and areas of overlap, and remedies incorrect assumptions.

Make transition management someone's job

While most transition leaders would agree that the above elements are critical, they can often move quickly to the bottom of to-do lists given competing priorities. Consider appointing a dedicated integration management lead, who will be responsible for items like identifying and resolving key internal issues, overseeing key internal communications, and caring for staff. The ideal candidate for this position has a strong working relationship with transition leaders, is adept at project management, is respected by and works well with junior staff, and has a finger on the pulse of the pre-election apparatus.

The overnight shift from campaigning to preparing to govern is high stakes, and the way this pivot is managed can have real, lasting effects on the administration. Taking a thoughtful, intentional approach can set a firm foundation for governing.

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